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SUBJECT: SWISS FEDERAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS: BLOCHER FAILS TO
WIN DECEMBER 12 RE-ELECTION

REF: BERN 1026

BLOCHER NARROWLY DEFEATED: CONFUSION IN PARLIAMENT

¶1. (SBU) Right up until the voting began, the major Swiss pundits and insiders were saying that all seven Federal Councilors would be re-elected on December 12 by the Swiss Parliament. Justice Minister Christoph Blocher, whose SVP party had the strongest showing in the October parliamentary elections (reftel), was expected to garner the slimmest majority, given opposition to his candidacy by the Social Democrats (SP), the Greens, and the Christian Democrats (CVP). Nevertheless, he was still expected to be re-elected.

Swiss politics was therefore stunned when Blocher was narrowly defeated (125 to 115) in a second round of voting by another SVP candidate -- Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf -- who apparently was supported by the SP, Greens, and majority of the CVP. Whether Widmer-Schlumpf knew in advance that the SP, Greens, and CVP planned to vote for her en masse remains an open question. In any case, the outcome was at a minimum a blunt challenge to the SVP leadership by the center left parties.

¶2. (SBU) Widmer-Schlumpf is a cantonal finance minister from the eastern Canton of Graubuenden, and the daughter of a former Federal Councilor. When the election results were announced, she reportedly was on a train, bound for Bern, and there was confusion in the Parliament as to whether she would accept her election. Later in the day, it was learned that Widmer-Schlumpf had said she would need until 8:00 a.m. on December 13 to make up her mind as to whether she indeed would accept the position on the Federal Council.

OTHER FEDERAL COUNCILORS ELECTED AS EXPECTED

¶3. (SBU) Prior to the Blocher round, the elections to the Federal Council went according to script, with Moritz Leuenberger (SP), Pascal Couchebin (FDP), Samuel Schmid (SVP), and Micheline Calmy-Rey (SP) all winning re-election. The confusion following Blocher's defeat was considerable and persisted because Widmer-Schlumpf could not be reached, and it remained unclear whether she would even accept the election. Parliament nevertheless eventually proceeded with the remaining two Federal Council elections, re-electing Hans-Rudolf Merz (FDP) and Doris Leuthard (CVP). Deputy Chancellor Corina Casanova (CVP) also was elected to assume the Chancellorship from outgoing Chancellor Annemarie Huber-Hotz. Finally, and also as expected, the FDP's Pascal Couchebin was elected to serve as Federal President during ¶2008. He is expected to assume those duties from Calmy-Rey

at the beginning of January. Following these elections, the six re-elected Federal Council members all took the oath of office, and Parliament adjourned until the morning of December 13.

SVP THREATENS TO GO INTO OPPOSITION

¶4. (SBU) Not surprisingly, Widmer-Schlumpf's election (and Blocher's defeat) caused anger and consternation on the right, and glee on the left, in Swiss politics. After the vote, a number of SVP parliamentarians expressed their belief that Widmer-Schlumpf would not accept her election, and they reaffirmed the SVP mantra that the SVP would quit the coalition government and go into parliamentary opposition in such case. For the time being, Swiss politics is paralyzed until Widmer-Schlumpf makes public her decision. If she accepts her election, the Federal Council will be complete, but Swiss politics will enter uncharted waters. Post will report more on these developments, including any implications for U.S.-Swiss relations, as the facts become known.

CONEWAY